



# 2020 Student Success and Retention Benchmarks

For first-year, second-year, and transfer students  
at four-year private and public institutions.

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STUDENT SUCCESS





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FTIC = First Time in College (first-year students)

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## INTRODUCTION: INSIGHTS INTO PERSISTENCE, PROGRESSION, AND RETENTION

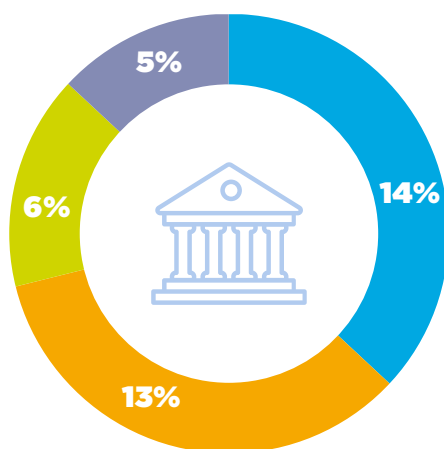
This is the third iteration of our student retention benchmark poll, and we are excited to share the results with you. We have collected persistence, progression, retention, and student success funding benchmarks so that you can compare your outcomes and funding decisions. The funding benchmarks are new for 2020, and we hope to establish baselines among our campus partners.

### Attrition patterns for first-time-in-college (FTIC) students

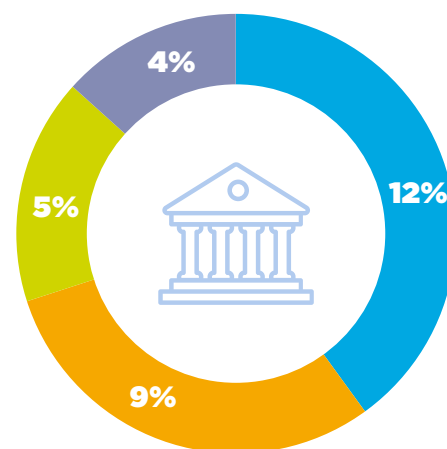
Table 12 in this report outlines four-year public and private reenrollment patterns during the first two years of the student lifecycle. We have long known that if a student retains until year three, subsequent attrition is usually in the low single digits.

The following pie charts show attrition patterns for each term during the first two years. Most attrition happens during year one (an average of 27 percent for four-year publics and 21 percent for four-year privates in this poll). That is why most institutions continue to devote more resources to student success in year one. However, these data support the need for integrated student success and reenrollment strategies designed to maximize retention outcomes during the first two years of the student experience and produce higher graduation rates.

#### FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC FIRST- AND SECOND-YEAR ATTRITION PATTERNS



#### FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE FIRST- AND SECOND-YEAR ATTRITION PATTERNS





## Progression patterns for first-time-in-college (FTIC) students

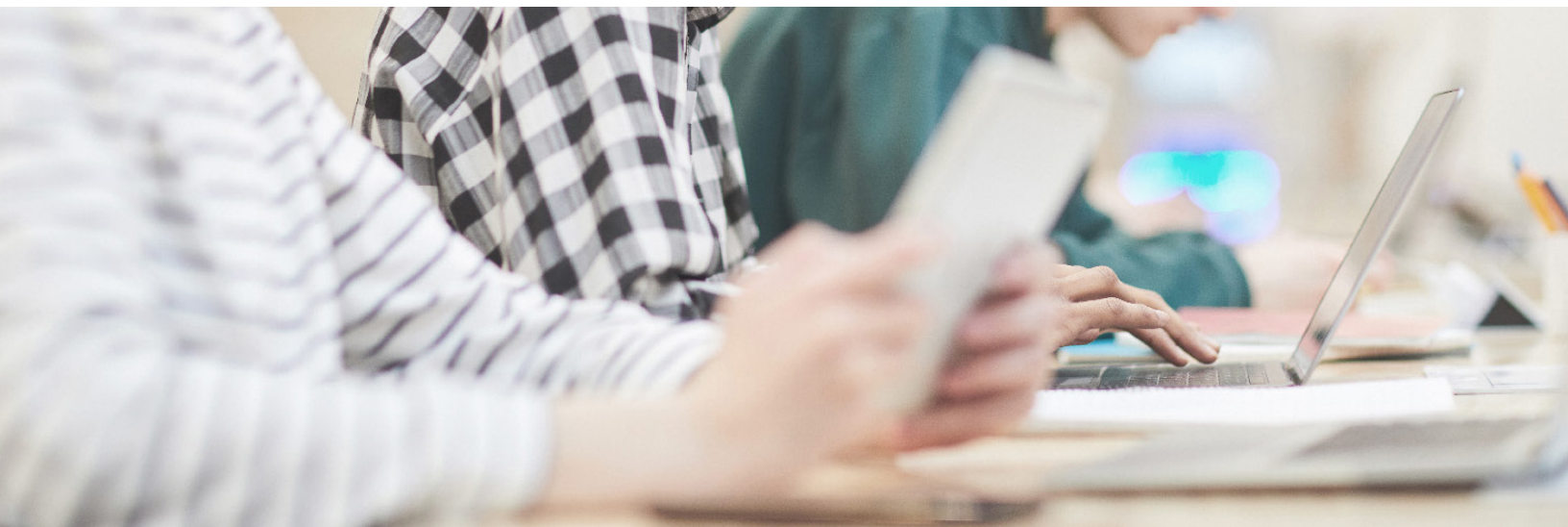
As students persist from term to term and head toward graduation, many of them don't progress. Hours attempted versus hours earned is always a good indicator for on-time completion. In recent years we have seen (somewhat) controversial recommendations that full-time is 15 hours and that students must be registered for at least 15 hours each term to complete on time. For four-year privates in this study, the median attempt hovered near 15 hours in both terms one and two (see Tables 5 and 6). However, the attempt rate for four-year public institutions was just over 14 hours in terms one and two. It's not clear if this means colleges and universities are advising for on-time completion, or if this is only representative of the institutions who participated in this study. Regardless, many campuses are faced with the improvement of on-time completion. Using these benchmarks and comparing your earned rate might help your institution develop strategies that produce that desired outcome.

Many students are earning about 90 percent of the hours they attempt, according to the respondents, but there are also about 13 percent of public FTIC students on probation at the end of term one and 12 percent at the end of term two (see Table 7). Probation levels are about half that amount for privates. Nonetheless, the data highlight the need for academic support programs whether they be peer or professional tutoring, SI™, math labs, writing labs, and other software that supports learning.

## Student success and retention budgets

This new section reviews annual expenditure on student success programs such as academic advising, student success, academic support, and other offices dedicated to retention management. The mean expenditure made by four-year private institutions over the three-year period was almost \$836,000, while four-year public institutions allotted just over \$1M on average. Notably, these expenditures were increased for the 2019–20 academic year for both sectors.

Most of these costs are related to personnel, with the highest percentage allotted to academic advising, academic support, and early alert. This is not surprising to us at RNL because we work with so many dedicated retention and student success professionals who strive to build the necessary relationships with students and their families. It still is about developing a sense of belonging and mattering. When students face adversity, they tend to try harder to remain enrolled if they feel like they belong.



## ABOUT THE SURVEY AND RESEARCH PROCESS

### About the statistical process used in this study

All of the figures in the report are judged to be statistically significant. This determination was made by calculating each finding's statistical significance (e.g., means, medians, proportions, and other relevant test statistics) and then judging the confidence interval to be acceptably small relative to the size of the finding.

### Institutional selectivity for private institutions

Selectivity for four-year private institutions was determined by institutional admit rate. The median admit rate for the sample in this sector was 72 percent. Thus, institutions with higher selectivity were those with admit rates less than or equal to 72 percent and those with lower selectivity with admit rates greater than 72 percent.



We did not collect enough data from two-year institutions to report.

### Why do we report 25th and 75th percentiles?

The quartiles are provided to make comparisons more precise for readers. For example, the quartiles show that the middle 50 percent of respondents from all four-year private institutions (the first column of Table 1) reported the proportion of students on probation at the end of term one was between 91 percent (the 25th percentile) and 95.8 percent (the 75th percentile). In addition, one can observe that 25 percent of respondents in the data set were below 91 percent and 25 percent of respondents in the data set were above 95.8 percent.

## PERSISTENCE BENCHMARKS

Persistence is defined as term-to-term return. For the tables in this section, each percentage was calculated based on the enrollment of the previous term.

**Table 1**

### FTIC TERM-TO-TERM PERSISTENCE RATE BENCHMARKS

(based on 2018-19 FTIC cohort)

Persistence Ratios		FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE			FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
		ALL	LOWER SELECTIVITY	HIGHER SELECTIVITY	ALL
Persistence from term one to term two, 2018-19 academic year	25th Percentile	88.0%	88.5%	88.3%	80.0%
	<b>Median</b>	<b>91.0%</b>	<b>91.0%</b>	<b>92.0%</b>	<b>86.5%</b>
	75th Percentile	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	97.0%
Persistence from term two of the 2018-19 academic year to term three (the beginning of the 2019-20 academic year, i.e., the students' third year)	25th Percentile	82.0%	83.0%	81.0%	77.0%
	<b>Median</b>	<b>85.0%</b>	<b>85.0%</b>	<b>84.0%</b>	<b>81.0%</b>
	75th Percentile	89.0%	90.0%	87.0%	91.0%

**Table 2**

### SECOND-YEAR UNDERGRADUATE TERM-TO-TERM PERSISTENCE RATE BENCHMARKS

(based on 2018-19 second-year cohort)

Persistence Ratios		FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE			FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
		ALL	LOWER SELECTIVITY	HIGHER SELECTIVITY	ALL
Persistence from term one to term two, 2018-19 academic year	25th Percentile	91.5%	91.8%	91.5%	90.3%
	<b>Median</b>	<b>93.0%</b>	<b>93.0%</b>	<b>93.0%</b>	<b>92.0%</b>
	75th Percentile	96.5%	97.3%	96.0%	93.8%
Persistence from term two of the 2018-19 academic year to term three (the beginning of the 2019-20 academic year, i.e., the students' third year)	25th Percentile	91.0%	90.0%	92.0%	88.5%
	<b>Median</b>	<b>93.5%</b>	<b>93.0%</b>	<b>94.0%</b>	<b>90.0%</b>
	75th Percentile	94.8%	95.0%	94.0%	93.0%

**Table 3**  
**NEWLY-ARRIVED TRANSFER STUDENT TERM-TO-TERM PERSISTENCE RATE BENCHMARKS**

(based on 2018–19 new transfer student cohort)

Persistence Ratios		FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE			FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
		ALL	LOWER SELECTIVITY	HIGHER SELECTIVITY	ALL
Persistence from term one to term two, 2018–19 academic year	25th Percentile	87.5%	88.0%	87.0%	79.5%
	<b>Median</b>	<b>90.0%</b>	<b>90.0%</b>	<b>90.0%</b>	<b>88.0%</b>
	75th Percentile	94.0%	93.3%	94.0%	91.8%
Persistence from term two of the 2018–19 academic year to term three (the beginning of the 2019–20 academic year, i.e., the students' third year)	25th Percentile	83.5%	85.8%	82.0%	80.0%
	<b>Median</b>	<b>87.0%</b>	<b>89.5%</b>	<b>86.0%</b>	<b>84.5%</b>
	75th Percentile	93.0%	93.0%	93.0%	94.3%

**Table 4**  
**RETURNING TRANSFER STUDENT TERM-TO-TERM PERSISTENCE RATE BENCHMARKS**

(based on 2018–19 returning transfer student cohort)

Persistence Ratios		FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE			FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
		ALL	LOWER SELECTIVITY	HIGHER SELECTIVITY	ALL
Persistence from term one to term two, 2018–19 academic year	25th Percentile	91.0%	93.0%	88.0%	84.5%
	<b>Median</b>	<b>93.0%</b>	<b>95.0%</b>	<b>92.0%</b>	<b>92.0%</b>
	75th Percentile	95.8%	98.0%	95.0%	95.0%
Persistence from term two of the 2018–19 academic year to term three (the beginning of the 2019–20 academic year, i.e., the students' third year)	25th Percentile	66.8%	75.0%	64.0%	75.0%
	<b>Median</b>	<b>77.5%</b>	<b>85.0%</b>	<b>69.0%</b>	<b>78.0%</b>
	75th Percentile	92.8%	100.0%	80.0%	89.0%

## PROGRESSION BENCHMARKS

Progression is defined as any activity that correlates with persistence, such as course completion and academic probation rates.

**Table 5**  
**FTIC CREDIT HOURS ATTEMPTED VS. CREDIT HOURS COMPLETED IN TERM ONE, 2018-19 ACADEMIC YEAR**

Progression Metrics		FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE			FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
		ALL	LOWER SELECTIVITY	HIGHER SELECTIVITY	ALL
Credit hours attempted	25th Percentile	14.7	14.5	15.0	13.9
	<b>Median</b>	<b>15.1</b>	<b>14.9</b>	<b>15.3</b>	<b>14.4</b>
	75th Percentile	15.4	15.2	15.5	15.9
Credit hours completed	25th Percentile	13.6	13.6	13.6	12.5
	<b>Median</b>	<b>14.0</b>	<b>14.2</b>	<b>13.9</b>	<b>13.2</b>
	75th Percentile	14.7	14.7	14.7	14.2
Ratio of credit hours completed to credit hours attempted	25th Percentile	0.90	0.90	0.90	0.86
	<b>Median</b>	<b>0.93</b>	<b>0.93</b>	<b>0.92</b>	<b>0.91</b>
	75th Percentile	0.96	0.97	0.93	0.92

**Table 6**  
**FTIC CREDIT HOURS ATTEMPTED VS. CREDIT HOURS COMPLETED IN TERM TWO, 2018-19 ACADEMIC YEAR**

Progression Metrics		FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE			FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
		ALL	LOWER SELECTIVITY	HIGHER SELECTIVITY	ALL
Credit hours attempted	25th Percentile	14.7	14.5	15.5	13.5
	<b>Median</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>14.7</b>	<b>15.5</b>	<b>14.4</b>
	75th Percentile	15.6	15.2	15.7	15.8
Credit hours completed	25th Percentile	13.3	13.3	13.4	12.0
	<b>Median</b>	<b>14.0</b>	<b>13.6</b>	<b>14.3</b>	<b>12.9</b>
	75th Percentile	14.8	14.3	14.9	14.4
Ratio of credit hours completed to credit hours attempted	25th Percentile	0.885	0.890	0.883	0.870
	<b>Median</b>	<b>0.920</b>	<b>0.930</b>	<b>0.915</b>	<b>0.910</b>
	75th Percentile	0.945	0.940	0.945	0.930



**Table 7**  
**PROPORTIONS OF FTIC STUDENTS ON ACADEMIC PROBATION AT END OF TERM ONE VS. END OF TERM TWO, 2018-19 ACADEMIC YEAR**

Progression Metrics		FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE			FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
		ALL	LOWER SELECTIVITY	HIGHER SELECTIVITY	ALL
Proportion of students on probation at end of term one, 2018-19 academic year	25th Percentile	3.0%	3.1%	3.0%	9.0%
	<b>Median</b>	<b>5.0%</b>	<b>5.0%</b>	<b>5.7%</b>	<b>13.0%</b>
	75th Percentile	9.2%	6.8%	11.9%	19.3%
Proportion of students on probation at end of term two, 2018-19 academic year	25th Percentile	2.9%	5.3%	2.6%	10.0%
	<b>Median</b>	<b>6.0%</b>	<b>6.5%</b>	<b>3.3%</b>	<b>12.0%</b>
	75th Percentile	8.3%	8.0%	12.5%	20.6%

## RETENTION BENCHMARKS

**Table 8**  
**FTIC FALL-TO-FALL RETENTION RATE BENCHMARKS FROM FALL 2018 TO FALL 2019**  
(based on 2018-19 FTIC cohort)

Retention Ratios		FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE			FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
		ALL	LOWER SELECTIVITY	HIGHER SELECTIVITY	ALL
25th Percentile		75.0%	76.0%	73.5%	67.3%
<b>Median</b>		<b>77.5%</b>	<b>78.0%</b>	<b>77.0%</b>	<b>73.0%</b>
75th Percentile		82.3%	85.0%	81.5%	86.3%

**Table 9**  
**SECOND-YEAR UNDERGRADUATES' FALL-TO-FALL RETENTION RATE BENCHMARKS FROM FALL 2018 TO FALL 2019**  
(based on 2018-19 second-year cohort)

Retention Ratios		FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE			FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
		ALL	LOWER SELECTIVITY	HIGHER SELECTIVITY	ALL
25th Percentile		86.0%	84.5%	86.0%	82.0%
<b>Median</b>		<b>90.0%</b>	<b>90.0%</b>	<b>89.0%</b>	<b>83.0%</b>
75th Percentile		92.0%	92.8%	92.0%	85.0%

**Table 10**  
**NEWLY-ARRIVED TRANSFER STUDENT FALL-TO-FALL RETENTION RATE**  
**BENCHMARKS FROM FALL 2018 TO FALL 2019**

(based on 2018–19 new transfer student cohort)

Retention Ratios	FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE			FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
	ALL	LOWER SELECTIVITY	HIGHER SELECTIVITY	ALL
25th Percentile	73.0%	74.3%	73.0%	69.0%
<b>Median</b>	<b>80.0%</b>	<b>78.5%</b>	<b>80.0%</b>	<b>76.0%</b>
75th Percentile	83.0%	83.3%	83.0%	87.5%

**Table 11**  
**RETURNING TRANSFER STUDENT FALL-TO-FALL RETENTION RATE**  
**BENCHMARKS FROM FALL 2018 TO FALL 2019**

(based on 2018–19 returning transfer student cohort)

Retention Ratios	FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE			FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
	ALL	LOWER SELECTIVITY	HIGHER SELECTIVITY	ALL
25th Percentile	59.3%	70.5%	57.0%	62.0%
<b>Median</b>	<b>70.5%</b>	<b>78.5%</b>	<b>66.0%</b>	<b>68.0%</b>
75th Percentile	87.5%	90.5%	70.5%	84.0%

**Table 12**  
**LONGITUDINAL VIEW FOR FTIC STUDENTS: CONTINUING ENROLLMENT,**  
**TERMS ONE TO FIVE**

(based on 2017–18 cohort)

Continuation Rates	FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE	FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
Persistence from term one to term two, 2017–18 academic year	91%	87%
Persistence from term two of the 2017–18 academic year to term three (first term of 2018–19 academic year)	79%	73%
Persistence from term three to term four, 2018–19 academic year	75%	68%
Persistence from term four of the 2018–19 academic year to term five (first term of 2019–20 academic year)	70%	62%

These percentages are the means. Each is calculated based on the original cohort size.

## STUDENT SUCCESS AND RETENTION BUDGET



### New benchmark

How much do campuses spend on student success programs such as academic advising, student success, academic support, and other offices dedicated to retention management? The following two tables show the median and mean costs for private and public institutions. Table 13 includes personnel costs, while Table 14 shows those expenditures without personnel costs.

**Table 13**  
**ANNUAL EXPENDITURE ON STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAMS**

Years		FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE	FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
2017-18	Median	\$438,683	\$790,000
	Mean	\$775,029	\$1,003,197
2018-19	Median	\$401,844	\$547,469
	Mean	\$787,864	\$873,071
2019-20	Median	\$578,663	\$725,000
	Mean	\$944,180	\$1,143,597

**Table 14**  
**ANNUAL EXPENDITURE ON STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAMS MINUS PERSONNEL COSTS**

Years		FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE	FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC
2017-18	Median	\$73,995	\$150,000
	Mean	\$137,893	\$256,128
2018-19	Median	\$73,391	\$200,000
	Mean	\$141,516	\$279,461
2019-20	Median	\$15,000	\$200,000
	Mean	\$301,499	\$287,794



## PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

### FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

Alderson Broaddus University (WV)

Aquinas College (MI)

Ashland University (OH)

Carroll College (MT)

Concordia University-Nebraska

Concordia University-Saint Paul (MN)

Davenport University (MI)

DePauw University (IN)

Dominican University of California

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (FL)

Emerson College (MA)

Goshen College (IN)

Goucher College (MD)

Houston Baptist University (TX)

Jacksonville University (FL)

Kentucky Wesleyan College

Life Pacific College (CA)

Manhattanville College (NY)

McDaniel College (MD)

Mount Aloysius College (PA)

Mount St. Mary's University (MD)

Mount Vernon Nazarene University (OH)

Northwestern College (IA)

Simpson College (IA)

Southwestern University (TX)

Spring Arbor University (MI)

Texas Lutheran University

Trinity University (TX)

Universidad Ana G. Mendez-Gurabo  
Campus (Puerto Rico)

University of Pikeville (KY)

University of Scranton (PA)

University of St. Francis (IL)

Utica College (NY)

Washington & Jefferson College (PA)

Whitworth University (WA)

Wilkes University (PA)

Worcester Polytechnic Institute (MA)

Xavier University (OH)

### FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Central Michigan University

Frostburg State University (MD)

Kansas State University Olathe

Lamar University (TX)

Murray State University (KY)

Northern Kentucky University

Radford University (VA)

Southwestern Oklahoma State University

St. Mary's College of Maryland

University of Missouri-St Louis

University of North Georgia

University of Pittsburgh-Bradford (PA)

University of Pittsburgh-Greensburg (PA)

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Civitas Learning helps colleges and universities harness the power of their student data to improve student success outcomes. They embed actionable intelligence into a connected, workflow technology so that higher education can focus their student success strategies, deliver proactive care, inspire holistic advising, and quickly measure what's working and for whom. With their student success solution, they empower leaders, advisors and faculty with the tools they need to measurably improve enrollment, persistence, and graduation outcomes. Civitas Learning works with nearly 400 colleges and universities, reaching nearly 9 million students. Together with their growing community of customers, they are making the most of the world's learning data to help graduate a million more students per year by 2025.

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RNL works with colleges and universities across the country to help them retain more students and guide more students to completion. Talk with our experts about:

- Student retention planning
- Early-alert assessments and interventions
- Student satisfaction and the student experience
- Yield and engagement to prevent stop-outs
- Resources and career services

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